

OHRNET

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PARSHA INSIGHTS

DESERT MOTEL 1

“G-d appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent...” (18:1)

Avraham planted a beautiful orchard in Be'er Sheva. In this orchard he put up his tent. The tent was constantly open on all four sides. The four sides symbolize this world. We relate to this world by the four compass points. Avraham had his tent open on all four sides to attract guests from all directions, from all walks of life. From whichever direction you came, whatever your background, Avraham's tent was attractive.

We, who try as modern-day Avrahams to provide for the spiritual sustenance to our brothers who are wandering in a spiritual desert, must give them access to their heritage from wherever they have come, and with whatever baggage they are carrying.

DESERT MOTEL 2

“G-d appeared to him (Avraham) in the plains of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance of his tent...” (18:1)

The Midrash relates that when Avraham opened his tent to the world, the word spread that a wonderful person had opened a free hotel in the desert with abundant shelter and refreshment. The guests arrived from far and wide, enjoyed their meal, and then arose to go.

“You must make a *beracha* (blessing) after your meal.” Said Avraham, “Say ‘Blessed is the Master of the Universe from Whose generosity we have eaten!’ ”

“We don't want to say a *beracha*” complained the guests. “Who is this Master of the Universe?”

Avraham replied to them “You may do as you please, but if you don't make a *beracha*, I will have to charge you for the meal.”

“How much is it?” replied the guests.

“Well, a bottle of wine is ten gold pieces. A steak is ten gold pieces and a loaf of bread is ten gold pieces.”

“What! That's exorbitant!”

“Tell me please,” said Avraham, “what is the price of a loaf in the middle of the desert?” Where else in this wilderness could you find wine or meat?”

The guests had to concede that Avraham was right. “Who was that Master that you asked us to thank? Let us bless him.”

The Midrash continues that by means of his hospitality and teachings, Avraham drew thousands of people closer to G-d.

Ostensibly, the guests in this story don't sound as though they were particularly drawn to G-d. It sounds more as if they preferred to mouth a few words of blessing rather than cough up a hefty lunch tab.

Rather, by pointing out to his guests the rarity of food and drink in the desert Avraham led them to reflect on the miraculous nature of their entire existence in this world. Was not the whole world a desert were it not for the rain, the soil, and the miracle of food that grows in the dirt?

Avraham led his guests to introspect on the entire source of sustenance. He opened their eyes to the fact that this four-sided tent called the world is no more than a desert motel hanging precariously in space, created and sustained only by the Master of the Universe.

Source:

• Based on the Midrash, Bereishet Rabba 49

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PARSHA OVERVIEW

Three days after performing *brit mila* on himself, Avraham is visited by G-d. When three angels appear in human form, Avraham rushes to show them hospitality by bringing them into his tent, despite this being the most painful time after the operation. Sarah laughs when she hears from them that she will bear a son next year. G-d reveals to Avraham that He will destroy Sodom, and Avraham pleads for Sodom to be spared. G-d agrees that if there are fifty righteous people in Sodom He will not destroy it. Avraham “bargains” G-d down to ten righteous people. However, not even ten can be found. Lot, his wife and two daughters are rescued just before sulfur and fire rain down on Sodom and her sister cities. Lot’s wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot’s daughters fear that as a result of the destruction there will be no husbands for them. They decide to get their father drunk and through him to perpetuate the human race. From the elder daughter, Moav is born, and from the younger, Ammon. Avraham moves to Gerar where Avimelech abducts Sarah. After G-d appears to Avimelech in a dream, he releases Sarah and appeases

Avraham. As promised, a son, Yitzchak, is born to Sarah and Avraham. On the eighth day after the birth, Avraham circumcises him as commanded. Avraham makes a feast the day Yitzchak is weaned. Sarah tells Avraham to banish Hagar and Hagar’s son Yishmael because she sees in him signs of degeneracy. Avraham is distressed at the prospect of banishing his son, but G-d tells him to listen to whatever Sarah tells him to do. After nearly dying of thirst in the desert, Yishmael is rescued by an angel and G-d promises that he will be the progenitor of a mighty nation. Avimelech enters into an alliance with Avraham when he sees that G-d is with him. In a tenth and final test, G-d instructs Avraham to take Yitzchak, who is now 37, and to offer him as a sacrifice. Avraham does this, in spite of ostensibly aborting Jewish nationhood and contradicting his life-long preaching against human sacrifice. At the last moment, G-d sends an angel to stop Avraham. Because of Avraham’s unquestioning obedience, G-d promises him that even if the Jewish People sin, they will never be completely dominated by their foes. The Parsha ends with the genealogy and birth of Rivka.

ISRAEL Forever

THE LESSON OF SODOM

The total destruction of the sinful cities of Sodom and Amorah is graphically described in the Torah portion which will be read in synagogues everywhere this Shabbat.

Ramban, in his commentary, points out that there were people in other lands who were extremely wicked and yet did not meet the awful fate of the Sodomites. He offers two reasons why Sodom had to be destroyed.

One is that these sinful cities were located in Eretz Yisrael whose holiness does not tolerate the abominations of which

they were guilty. There was also the need to create an historical precedent which would serve as a warning to the Jewish People who would inherit this land of what could happen to them if they should falter in their obedience to the Torah’s commands.

It is the hope of every Jew that this lesson which they learn in hearing the Torah’s account of the destruction of Sodom, which was guilty of disrespect for G-d and callous disregard for the needs of others, will somehow reach all Jews in Israel and guarantee Israel forever.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

A DEATH THAT SAVED LIFE

Over a dozen Israelis were killed and scores were wounded in the recent terrorist actions in the Tabah area of Egyptian Sinai. One particular Jew who spent the holiday in the Tabah Hilton which was the hardest hit escaped death thanks to his father’s dying wish.

At the funeral of his father this fellow recounted that

he left the doomed hotel upon receiving an urgent message that his dying father wanted to take leave of all his children before passing from this world. He immediately complied with this wish and left the hotel a short time before the explosion.

“Even in death,” he tearfully declared, “my father who gave me life saved my life.”

PARSHA Q&A ?

1. Why did G-d appear to Avraham after the *brit mila*?
2. Why was Avraham sitting at the entrance to his tent?
3. What were the missions of the three angels?
4. Why did Avraham enjoin the guests to wash the dust off their feet?
5. Why did Avraham ask specifically Yishmael, and not someone else, to prepare food for the guests?
6. Why did the angels ask Avraham where Sarah was?
7. When G-d related Sarah's thoughts to Avraham, He did not relate them precisely. Why?
8. What "cry" from Sodom came before G-d?
9. How many angels went to Sodom?
10. Why was Lot sitting at the gate of Sodom?
11. Lot served the angels *matza*. Why?
12. Why did Lot delay when he left Sodom?
13. Why were Lot and his family not permitted to look back at Sodom?
14. Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt. Why was she punished in this particular way?
15. In what merit did G-d save Lot?
16. Why did Avraham relocate after the destruction of Sodom?
17. Why did Avimelech give gifts to Avraham?
18. Why was Avraham told to listen to Sarah?
19. Why did G-d listen to the prayer of Yishmael and not to that of Hagar?
20. Who accompanied Avraham and Yitzchak to the *akeidah* (binding)?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this Week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

1. 18:1 - Avraham was sick, so G-d came to "visit" him.
2. 18:1 - He was looking for guests.
3. 18:2 - To announce Yitzchak's birth, to heal Avraham and to destroy Sodom.
4. 18:4 - He thought they were among those who worship the dust, and he didn't want any object of idolatry in his home.
5. 18:7 - To train him in the performance of *mitzvot*.
6. 18:9 - To call attention to Sarah's modesty, so as to endear her to her husband.
7. 18:13 - For the sake of peace.
8. 18:21 - The cry of a girl who was executed for giving food to the poor.
9. 19:1 - Two; one to destroy the city and one to save Lot.
10. 19:1 - He was a judge.
11. 19:3 - It was Passover.
12. 19:16 - He wanted to save his property.
13. 19:17 - As they, too, deserved to be punished, it wasn't fitting for them to witness the destruction of Sodom.
14. 19:26 - She was stingy, not wanting to give the guests salt.
15. 19:29 - Lot had protected Avraham by concealing from the Egyptians the fact that Sarah was his wife.
16. 20:1 - Because travel in the region ceased and Avraham could no longer find guests.
17. 20:14 - So that Avraham would pray for him.
18. 21:12 - Because she was greater in prophecy.
19. 21:17 - Because the prayer of a sick person is more readily accepted than the prayer of others on his behalf.
20. 22:3 - Yishmael and Eliezer.

LOVE OF THE LAND - THE NAMES

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

THE PILLAR OF SALT

When the angels destroyed Sodom and rescued the family of Avraham's nephew Lot from the destruction, they warned these fleeing refugees not to look back upon this destruction. When Lot's wife ignored this warning and looked back she turned into a pillar of salt.



The Midrash explains that she was punished measure for measure. When her husband asked her to provide some salt to flavor the meal of his angelic guests she refused and even scolded him for introducing such "corrupt" practices in the utterly inhospitable culture of Sodom.

She sinned with salt and was punished with salt.

KINDS OF FOOLS

Two kinds of fools are mentioned by King Solomon in his *Mishlei* (Proverbs). The passages dealing with them serve as clues to the Talmudic Sages for concluding that a *nazir* must offer the sacrifices prescribed by the Torah as atonement for becoming ritually impure through contact with the dead regardless of whether such contact was intentional or accidental.

The first is (*Mishlei* 14:15) “The fool believes everything.” As Rashi explains in his commentary, this refers to the foolishness of one who gives credence to all the reports of talebearers. This sort of impropriety is the unintentional result of naivete and is applied to the unintentional contact of the *nazir* with the dead.

But there is a second kind of fool described in *Mishlei* 22:3: “The clever person anticipates the harm that may come and avoids it, while the fools transgress and are punished.” Rashi there explains that the harm referred to in this passage is the punishment which comes for sin. Since punishment comes only for intentional sin, Rashi in our *gemara* points out, that the fool described here is one who willfully ignores the consequences of his sinful action, and the application to the *nazir* is in regard to one who intentionally violates the sanctity of the status he has assumed by coming into contact with the dead.

• Keritot 9a

THE ORIGINAL “MINUTEMAN”

The “minuteman” is familiar to students of American history as the revolutionary warrior who was prepared to go to battle against the hated British “Redcoats” on a minute’s notice.

The original “minuteman”, however, was prepared for a different sort of mission. The scapegoat on Yom Kippur was to carry the sins of the Jewish People out to a distant cliff in the wilderness and thus achieve atonement for the sins of the nation. The *Kohen Gadol* who performed the entire service on this holy day was commanded to “send

it out into the wilderness with a man who had been appointed for this role”. (*Vayikra* 16:21)

The use of the term “man” led our Sages to conclude that this “minuteman” did not have to be a *kohen*. The Torah’s stress on this mission being performed by the very man who had been appointed for it led to the conclusion that he would be qualified for this role even if he became ritually impure before he was to begin.

In *Mesechta Yoma* (66b) the *gemara* asks why it was necessary to make this deduction from the Torah, since there is no apparent reason for disqualifying one ritually impure for leading the scapegoat to its death. The answer given is that this appointed minuteman is permitted to enter the *Beit Hamikdash* to take the scapegoat, an area which is out of bounds for any other ritually impure person.

But why, ask the commentaries, was it necessary for him to enter the Sanctuary in this state rather than have the scapegoat brought out to him? The answer lies in an earlier passage (*ibid.* 16:10) in which there is an instruction that while the goat designated as a sacrifice is slaughtered the one serving the role of scapegoat must remain “standing alive before G-d”. It is therefore necessary for the “minuteman” to enter the Sanctuary and take the scapegoat from its presence before G-d.

• Keritot 14a

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OLD AGES

From: Bob Mogel in Omaha, Nebraska

Dear Rabbi,

In the Hebrew Bible it states that in Biblical times people lived to be hundreds of years old. How is this possible given the fact that people don't live nearly as long today even with the advances in medical technology?

Dear Bob Mogel,

There are several reasons for the gradual reduction in life span from Biblical times to the present.

G-d initially intended to grant people eternal life. According to Kabbalistic texts, if Adam and Eve had refrained from eating from the Tree of Knowledge until Shabbat, thereby exercising free will to perfect themselves, G-d would have allowed them to eat of the Tree of Life and then from the Tree of Knowledge (Arizal, Sefer HaLikutim, Gen. #3, p. 26; Ramchal, Tikunim Chadashim #8). They would have obtained a level of spiritual excellence entitling them to live with full knowledge forever.

However, Adam and Eve transgressed the Will of G-d, bringing upon themselves the consequence of the warning, "But of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for on the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17). This isn't intended literally - they didn't die on that day. Rather it means that they brought upon themselves mortality.

Based on the verse, "For a thousand years in Your eyes are like a day that passed" (Psalms 90:3), our Sages explain that man's life span was limited to one of "G-d's days" which equals 1000 years. According to this, Adam should have lived to be a thousand years old. Why does the verse assert, "Adam lived nine hundred and thirty years, and he died" (Gen. 5:5)? The Midrash explains that Adam, with his great spiritual insight, foresaw that King David was destined to die as an infant, so he contributed seventy years of

his own life to David (Yalkut Shimoni, Gen. 41).

Later, as a result of further "misconduct", man's life span was shortened even more: "And the Lord said, Let My spirit not quarrel forever concerning man, because he is also flesh, and his days shall be a hundred and twenty years" (Gen. 6:3). Rashi explains G-d's intention: Behold My spirit is quarreling within Me whether to destroy or to have mercy. Let this quarrel in My spirit not endure forever, rather since man is only flesh, and nevertheless he does not subordinate himself before Me, let him live no more than 120 years. Ibn Ezra (c. 1100, Spain) explains that life spans would gradually decrease, until the maximum will be around 120. (For example, Adam lived to 930, Shem - 600, Abraham - 175, Jacob - 147, Moses - 120.)

Finally, until the Flood, there were no extremes in seasons; the weather was always comfortable and temperate. After the Flood, G-d tells Noah that there will be constant seasonal changes (Gen. 8:22). Malbim (1800's, Eastern Europe) explains that until the Flood, the earth's axis had no tilt relative to the sun. As a result of the flood, the earth's axis tilted in relation to the sun. Thus, the earth's climate changed drastically, resulting in a weakening of the human constitution and ability to withstand these constant changes in weather.

As for technology's inability to slow the aging process, "The scientific study of aging is a young discipline" (National Geographic Nov. '97). Compared to many areas of science, relatively little is known about aging. Richard A. Knox refers to getting older as the "black box of aging," and calls it a "mystery" (The Boston Globe 1997).

By way of example, take the case of Jeanne Calment who died in France at the age of 122. How was she able to live *that* long? No one knows. Given that she lived that long, why *only* that long? "Officials gave no specific cause of death" (Houston Chronicle News Services 8/5/97). Medically speaking, it seems she could have lived another ten - or 100 - years. Let's suggest it's because of this universal decree - we'll know for sure after (app.) 120.

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HAVE YOU HEARD THIS BEFORE?

Question: Everyone enjoys the pleasure of being the first to tell someone else some news or an interesting story. I often find, however, that many times I have already heard the news or the story and am tempted to tell my informer that there is no need for him to waste my time. What is the right thing to do?

Answer: Assuming that what you are being told does not come under the category of *lashon hara* (gossip or slander) to which you are forbidden to lend an ear, the issue which faces you is whether to sacrifice a few moments in order to make your informer feel good.

Professional comedians used to introduce their jokes

with the line "Stop me if you've heard this". But it is rare that a friend of yours will give you this escape hatch. It then becomes important for you to reflect on what our Talmudic Sages have said about a smile given to another person being more appreciated by him than offering him a cold, refreshing drink. This teaches us the importance of making others feel good, something which you accomplish by making believe you have never heard the news or story before.

And don't forget the "golden rule" of the Sage Hillel not to do to others what you don't want done to you. How do you feel when someone interrupts you by saying "I've heard this already"?

PUBLIC DOMAIN _____

Comments, quibbles and reactions concerning previous Ohrnet features

Ask! Archives

Regarding your wonderful "Ask" archive, I would like to respectfully point out in a recent answer a small mistake in English which I think you have overlooked. I quote: "At the beginning of the nineteenth century, strange artifacts began to be discovered. They were bones, bones of gigantic and monstrous creatures the like of which had never before been heard of. The word "artifact" means something made by man, and is usually used to distinguish between such an article and a natural one, such as a bone. Perhaps "remains" would be the correct word?"

Please excuse me for pointing this out; it just seems a pity to spoil the excellent and true impression you make of your deep erudition.

Many thanks and appreciation for your excellent and informative site! Kind regards,

• Susan J.

Ohrnet's 3-Part Series on the Lost Tribes

Good job on this one, Ohrnet. A copy was sent to a person involved in this subject who published a recent article on the subject via a listserv posting. In response someone mentioned that the Jewish Press recently published an article about your views on the Lost Tribes. It's so encouraging for this information to have more widespread dissemination so that others will at least begin thinking about the subject.

• A.

The Lost Tribes and Spain

In a recent published article called "The Lost Tribes: The Search for the Remnants of Israel" (The Jewish Press," Friday, October 15, 2004, Vol. LIV, No. 42) listed your organization as a source. In the area of those Jews who became assimilated and because of their 'significant vestiges of Jewish practices' they discovered they were of the Tribes of Israel, I am trying to learn 'what vestiges' and what clues were there that helped people identify themselves as of Jewish origin.

• Dr. Solomon H.

Ohrnet replies:

When speaking of the Jews from Spain and the Inquisition, it is important to remember that they are not of the Lost Tribes. The Lost Tribes were exiled in the time of the First Temple and never returned in significant numbers to the remaining Jews that were later exiled to Babylon, returned to Israel to build the second Temple, and then were exiled hundreds of years later by the Roman Empire. These Jews made their way to Spain, and were part of the Jewish people of the Tribes consisting of Judah, Benjamin, Levi like all other Jews. During the Inquisition, they hid their Jewish worship until their offspring retained nothing but curious, secretive vestiges of Jewish practice. For more info on these Jews who came to be called the Marranos see <http://www.kulanu.org/old/index-old.html> under Anusim, Inquisition, Marranos, Spain.